Growing Up In A Substance-Abusing Family

When you were growing up, did you ever worry about alcohol or other drug use by your parent or parental figure(s)? Did that person’s alcohol or drug use ever cause you problems? Have you ever wished that person drank less or used fewer drugs, or didn’t drink or use drugs at all? If you answered, “yes” to any of these questions, you may be among the nearly one in every four Americans who were raised by a parent (or parent figure) who abused alcohol or other drugs.

It isn’t easy to acknowledge that a parent or someone else who helped rear you had a drinking or other drug problem. You may not even have been sure there really was a problem, especially if you didn’t see them drinking or getting high, or they seemed to function well most of the time.

It’s complicated further by the reality that alcohol is a widely used recreational drug in the U.S. The freedom to drink alcohol legally often is celebrated as a rite of passage when an individual turns 21 years old. Alcohol sometimes has been discussed as a means to calm occasional nerves or prevent arteriosclerosis. Many people have one or two alcoholic drinks socially: at weddings, at parties, when out to dinner with friends.

Responsible use of alcohol includes designating a driver, and attending to the amount and type of alcohol ingested as well as possible interactions with prescription or OTC medications such as Tylenol. Such use of alcohol is typically accepted. But alcohol can run a much broader gamut. There are various ways of recognizing problematic alcohol use. Some are obvious; however, the subtle indicators that are often dismissed are just as devastating to individuals, relationships, family life, and the community. When a family has even one member who abuses alcohol, all family members are at risk for developing difficulties with alcohol use or other dysfunctional characteristics and interpersonal patterns. In this primary context of alcohol abuse, it is impossible for family members not to adapt in order to protect themselves physically, emotionally or psychologically. Moreover, if a grandparent or great-grandparent used alcohol excessively, the various coping adaptations of family members in the original alcoholic family will be passed on to subsequent generations in both overt and subtly rigid ways, even if no one drinks alcohol in subsequent generations. That is how subsequent family members learn to cope, through the adaptation to alcohol dependence.

If you grew up in an alcoholic or substance abusing family, you may have longed for the day when you were able to be more independent— to go to college or to work -- and to leave the pain and chaos of your family behind. You may be surprised to find yourself experiencing feelings of dissatisfaction or distance from other people, similar to those you felt at home. These feelings are easier to understand when you consider that families are the place where you learn about yourself and about life.

While many of us try to forget the past, and dismiss it as ancient history, in fact the best way to make the most of the present is to face your past, its importance, and its meaning for you. Letting go of undermining attitudes and behaviors is a very freeing experience, part of becoming a more self-directed individual.